

George Champlin Mason House
31 Old Beach Road
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-341

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HABS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-341

GEORGE CHAMPLIN MASON HOUSE

Location: 31 Old Beach Road
Present Owner: Mrs. Robert R. Carter
Present Occupant: Owner

Significance: This Swiss-style chalet was the personal residence of the Newport architect, George Champlin Mason (1820-1894). The exterior and interior illustrate Mason's interest in the revival of architectural styles, particularly in the use of colonial details in the interior.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

The building is located in Plat 26, Lot 21. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to number and volume and page of the Land Evidence Books, (LEB.44, p.285).

1873 Deed of March 6, 1873, recorded in LEB. 44, p.285.

From: Henry S. Sanford
To: George C. Mason
For: \$7500

"Further payment to be made by said Mason to Alfred Smith, \$22,500 which is secured by mortgages dated 7/1/1872, the said payments making \$30,000 together...a certain tract of land bounded Northerly on Old Beach Road, Easterly by land partly of J. D. Odgen and partly of land of Harriet Crowinshield, deceased, Southerly by land of John S. Ladd and Westerly with all buildings and improvements thereon and all furniture in the house excepting contents of locked closets and the plush curtains of the library. This grant made subject to the mortgage made by this grantor to Alfred Smith above described..."

Note: Upon purchase of the property, Mason subdivided the 2 1/2 acres into six lots. Retaining the corner lot, he sold the five remaining parcels and house for a total profit of \$5,500. On March 20, 1873, he sold the lot which contained the house to John LaFarge. (See LEB. 44, pp.287-88).

1881 Deed of November 15, 1881, recorded in LEB. 51, p.159.

From: George C. Mason
To: Henry S. Hoyt of New York
For: \$30,000

"...a certain tract of land at the corner of Old Beach Road and Sunnyside Place...bounded Northerly on said Beach Road, Easterly on land of Mary Potter, and Westerly on said Sunnyside Place, with the dwelling house, stable, and other improvements together with gas fixtures and carpets now in the house and the fuel now in the cellar and said lot of land containing 15,470 square feet be the same more or less..."

1906 Deed of April, 1906, recorded in LEB. 87, p.185.

From: Francis M. Hoyt by executors
To: Anne Randolph Marvin

1942 Deed of November 10, 1942, recorded in LEB. 151, p.533.

From: Lucy T. Marvin et al. by executor
To: Natalie Bayard Brown

1959 Deed of March 30, 1959, recorded in LEB. 198, p.34.

From: Natalie Bayard Brown
To: Angela Bayard Brown

1961 Deed of December 4, 1961, recorded in LEB. 205, p.166.

From: Nicholas Brown, Jr., J. Carter Brown, and
Angela Bayard Brown
To: Robert Ross Carter and Margaret Helena Carter

2. Date of erection: 1873-1874

3. Architect: George Champlin Mason

4. Builder or contractor: unknown

5. Original plans: None known

6. Alterations and additions: At a date contemporary with the construction of the house, a large servant's dining room was added behind the kitchen in an easterly direction. About 1909, paneling from the John Gidley House (originally located at Thames and Gidley Streets, dated 1725, probably designed by Richard Munday) was installed in the living room. In 1960, the panelling was sold to the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. On the second

floor the sewing room above the entrance has been converted to a bathroom. A connecting bathroom has been made from a closet between the two west bedrooms.

7. Important old views: Photographs of house from the northwest, Mason, George C., Newport and Its Cottages, Boston: James C. Osgood and Co., 1875.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

George Champlin Mason was born in Newport, descended from some of Rhode Island's more distinguished families. In the mid 1840s he traveled to Europe. He spent two years in Florence, Rome, and Paris studying drawing and architecture. He returned to the United States in 1846. In 1850, he became editor of the Newport Mercury. However, in 1858, due to the increase in building activity, he left the paper and opened his office, later taking his son George C. Mason, Jr. into partnership. Throughout his professional career as an architect, he made significant contributions to our present knowledge of the history of Newport. It was as editor of the newspaper that he called for the creation of the Newport Historical Society in 1853, being elected Corresponding Secretary. The publication of his book, Newport Illustrated in 1854, by D. Appleton and Co., New York, was important in the establishment of Newport as the chief "watering place" in America. As architect, artist, and writer, Mason was a major figure in the history of Newport in the second half of the 19th century.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Directories of the City of Newport, 1872-1875.
Newport Historical Society.
Records of Deeds in the Newport City Hall.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Mason, George C., The Old House Altered, New York:
G. T. Putnam's Sons, 1878.
Newport Mercury, October 25, 1873, p.2.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

George C. Mason's office records and personal papers.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General statement:

1. Architectural character: This Swiss-style chalet was the personal residence of the Newport architect, George Champlin Mason. The elaborate gable ended porch on the third story, with its sawn open work, sites the house and indicates the revival nature of the exterior as well as the interior.

2. Condition of fabric: The interior and exterior are in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 60 feet by 43 feet; square plan with wing; 3 bays, 2 1/2 stories.
2. Foundations: The foundation is fieldstone.
3. Wall construction: Horizontal clapboards cover the first story, with vertical board and batten on the second and attic stories. Elaborate sawn wood decoration highlights the porch and projecting balcony on the west facade where the large overhanging gable is filled with ornate sawn openwork.
4. Structural system, framing: The house has a frame structural system.
5. Chimneys: The house has three brick chimneys, one in the kitchen wing, one for the library and master bedroom, and a staggered double complex for the dining and living rooms. All three chimneys are supported on brick arch foundations.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: A panelled double door with light above is reached by a three step stoop.
 - b. Windows: Windows are generally double hung with two light sashes above and below. A French window on the west wall of the library provides access to the porch. Exterior louvered shutters are employed on all windows and the entrance.
7. Roof: The gabled roof has an east-west axis punctuated by a single dormer on each side. There is a hip roof over the semi-octagon bay of the library. Horizontal boards placed edge to edge cap the board and batten siding of the second story. The roof line is finished with open bracketed eaves.
8. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A porch 10 feet deep extends the length of the west facade. At the north corner of the east wall of the basement is located a bulkhead, with brick side walls and stone steps.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The large entrance hall, reached through an octagonal vestibule, is divided lengthwise by an arch which separates the staircase from the doorways to the three principal rooms. The library fills the northwest corner of the house, immediately to the

right to the entry. Large double, sliding doors open to the parlor at the southwest corner. Directly opposite the entrance, in the center of the south side of the house, is located the dining room. The dining room is serviced from the Butler's pantry by a door placed diagonally in the northeast corner of the room. The east wing of the house contains the service facilities with sleeping quarters above for the servants. The second floor, with its three large bedrooms, repeats the general configuration of the first floor. The attic, located above this area, has never been finished for use as sleeping quarters.

2. Stairways: The main staircase rises in four flights to second floor, turning 270 degrees. The mahogany handrail with colonial inspired balusters culminates in an oak newel post in the Eastlake manner. Colonial inspired sawn decoration embellishes the stringers. A closed straight run staircase provides access to the attic area.
3. Flooring: There are striped hardwood floors on the first floor. Second story floors are parquet, with those in the principal bedrooms decorated by dark hardwood borders.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings are finished with heavy plaster moldings.
5. Doorways and doors: Doors upstairs and down are four panelled with light sealed moldings. Sliding doors of similar design separate the library and living room. Doorways have finely carved moldings.
6. Special decorative features: Located at the ends of the semi-elliptical arch in the entrance hall are heavy plaster shields in a Tudor motif. A chair molding is applied to the walls in the entrance hall and dining room. In the center of the ceiling of each of the principal rooms is located a plaster decoration of stylized leaf forms from which hung chandeliers.
7. Hardware: The doors still retain their original silvered knobs.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is located on the northeast corner of Sunnyside Place and Old Beach Road, in a residential area. The major facade faces west toward Sunnyside Place, with the entrance on the north facade.
2. Historic landscape design: Informal and dense plantings surround the house.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1971. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Thomas M. Slade, (University of Notre Dame), Project Supervisor, Jack E. Boucher, photographer.